

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME MARCHES ON

KILLER TEXT ON ART

# artillery

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VISION  
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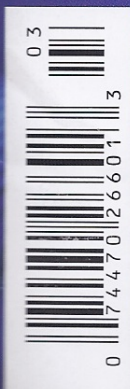
**Mike  
Kelley**

RETURNS  
to DETROIT

**Maurizio  
Cattelan**  
AT THE  
GUGGENHEIM

**Prospect.2**  
NEW ORLEANS

GUEST LECTURE: Ed Moses





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**artillery**  
KILLER TEXT ON ART

Vol 6 Issue 3 February/March 2012 [artillerymag.com](http://artillerymag.com)

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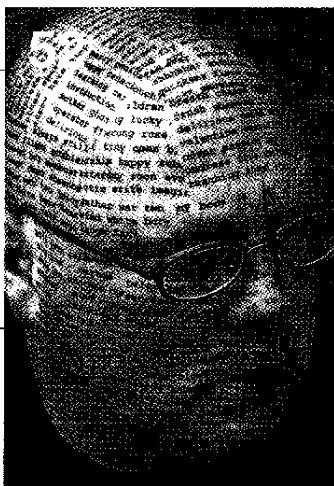
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## MIKE KELLEY GOES FULL CIRCLE

BY TULSA KINNEY

**EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT! ART STAR  
STOPS MAKING ART!**

That was going to be my headline after hearing the remark Mike Kelley made at the close of our interview.

I was wrapping up our conversation, all ready to ask the final question, like Barbara Walters: "What's next, Mike?" But before I could, Kelley preempted me: "I've been working non-stop for years and years, and now I'm not in the mood to make art. I'm trying to slow down."

Considering he was just back from his London show with Gagosian Gallery, and that that very week his Destroy All Monsters noise/art band group show at Prism gallery in Los Angeles was being installed, maybe he was just plain worn out, and perhaps being a little melodra-

# TRA

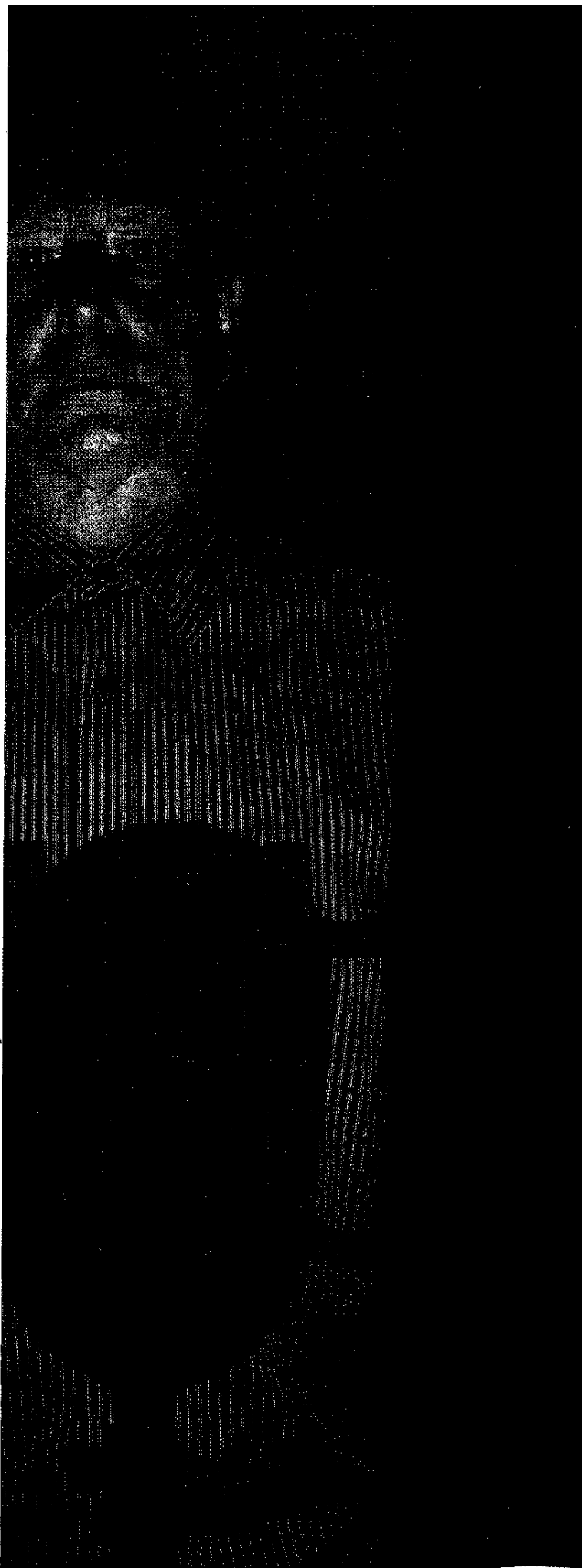
matic. He continued, "I have a lot of things I have to do, like a big survey show that's coming up in 2012; it's traveling. And some other shows that have been scheduled for a long time. I just did two shows this year, and big-scale shows. So I just want to stop for a couple of years."

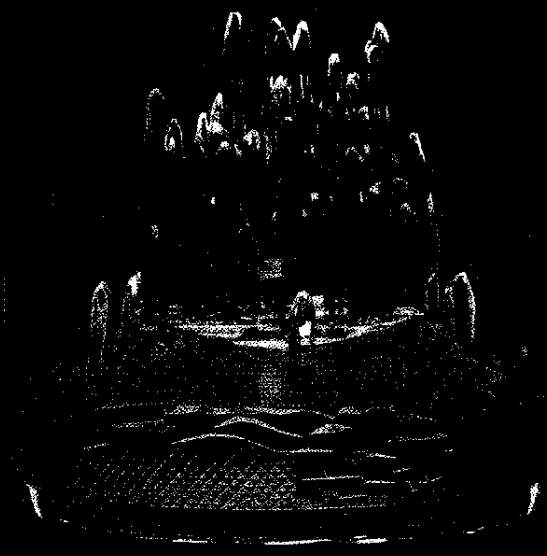
It got quiet toward the end of our interview, and if I didn't know better, I might even say he seemed a bit melancholy that late morning. It's true, Los Angeles-based artist Kelley has been making art for a long, long time. So to say he's taking a break is something akin to Duchamp's famous hiatus from making art to play professional chess.

But stop making art? I hate to break the news to him, but it's doubtful: He's in the Whitney Biennial (for the eighth time) this year with

*continued »*

This page: Mike Kelley, photo by Tyler Hubby. Opposite: Mike Kelley, *Kandor 14*, 2011, photo by Fredrik Nilsen, courtesy of Mike Kelley and Gagosian Gallery.





# DETROIT

an ongoing project. (More on this later.) That doesn't sound much like taking a break.

Known for his stuffed-animal sculptures and his wry text drawings, his performance art, his videos, his musical activities and his writing, Kelley is arguably one of the most influential living artists, and I've been wanting to feature him in *Artillery* for some time now.

Kelley finally agreed to an interview, but only reluctantly. Last issue, our gossip columnist got carried away, and Kelley was not happy with what he took to be gratuitous character assassination. But he honored his word and met with me anyway, and I couldn't help but be impressed by his integrity.

Kelley invited me to meet him at his office, which is actually his former studio/home, located in Highland Park on the eastside of Los Angeles. It still has the feel of a home—it actually is a house—as you enter at the back through an alley. I opened the wooden screen door to a bright spotless kitchen with shiny green tiles. Assistants were buzzing from one room to another.

Kelley greeted me as he was hastily finishing a piece of toast, which may have served as his breakfast. Casually dressed, with short-cropped graying hair, his intense blue eyes seldom caught mine. He was gracious though, and asked me if I wanted a cup of tea as he led me to the front living room, where the curtains remained drawn. There were two modern L-shaped couches and a coffee table in the middle with one lone ashtray that looked like it hadn't seen a cigarette in a long time. There was a large Lari Pittman on one wall, on another leaned a tall pink John McCracken, and the adjacent wall had an army-green James Hayward frosting painting hanging near the front door. He told me Hayward was an old friend to whom he would be forever indebted to for recommending him for his first teaching job in Minneapolis. This ultimately led to his professorial career of over 30 years in Southern California, where he has developed a following among students who, in turn, have perpetuated his influence in the contemporary art world.



Mike Kelley, *Spirit Voices*, 1978, performance at LACE, Los Angeles, 1978; L to R: Don Krieger and Mike Kelley

## DETROIT

Mike Kelley was raised Catholic and attended Catholic School—any Kelley aficionado knows this, as Catholicism is frequently addressed in his work. So I decided to start from the beginning. When I asked him if he ever believed in Heaven and Hell, he responded deliberately, in his deep, gravelly Detroit accent, “No. I never believed in anything.” He seemed sad when he said that, with a faraway look in his eyes. Even as a child, he said he never bought into the Catholic Church: “No. I never believed in it at all. I was stuck in it. It was pounded into me, but I wasn't indoctrinated. I suffered because I felt that something was wrong with me. I thought I should believe, and I just couldn't understand why I didn't.”

Aha! There's the Catholic guilt!

But even in the first grade, Kelley told me, he remembers thinking that religion “was a load of shit.” I envisioned a tiny kid saying “This is a load of shit!”

He grew up in a working class suburb of Detroit. His father was the head of maintenance in the local public school system, his mother a cook at the Ford Motor Company cafeteria. Kelley first knew he wanted to be an artist at age 13. He went directly from high school to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, then to CalArts. This trajectory suggested to me that he might have come from a supportive family that embraced his becoming an artist. He laughed for a long time, as if in slow motion, even a little maniacally. Then he stopped abruptly

I ASKED HIM IF HE WAS FROM A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY. “ALL NUCLEAR FAMILIES ARE DYSFUNCTIONAL,” HE REPLIED.

and corrected me. “No, my family did not support me in my interest in the arts. My parents were both really against it. My father basically disowned me.”

Kelley described his getaway plan back then. “Because otherwise I was going to go crazy. I was going to die. I actually had a nervous breakdown. I had no option, I had to leave my town. I would have been working in a local auto parts store for the rest of my life.” He paused, with those faraway eyes again, and added as an important afterthought: “I chose art, not to become successful, because you couldn't make a living from being an artist at that time. It was a profession I chose specifically in order to be a failure.” This is a poignant statement, considering the nature of the art world today. Artists in the past truly were rebels and iconoclasts, not career-driven puppets.

In his early days, before CalArts, Kelley delved into what was around him, incorporating his life into his art. “I was interested in hippie anarchist culture—in De-

troit and Ann Arbor, that meant the White Panther Party. They put on concerts and poetry readings; they wrote manifestos about how *bad* capitalism was. I read John Sinclair's writings, and I said to myself, these people are like me! I'm not crazy!” He explored the avant-garde and was deeply influenced by Dada. “The psychedelic underground was just an extension of the historical avant-garde. And I decided that I should be an artist—either that or a writer. I was particularly inspired by the writings of William Burroughs.

“When I was in high school, a group of students formed a recycling center. There was no organized recycling at that time. Working at that center, I discovered that there was a world of magazines about culture. I ripped articles out of these, and I basically taught myself about contemporary art. When I went to college, I was much more knowledgeable about it than the other students.” Smashing cans and breaking glass... and reading Dada! Mike Kelley learned about contemporary art in a dumpster, basically.

In junior high, Kelley switched from parochial to public school and acquired two art teachers. “One of my high school art teachers was a real macho guy. His paintings looked like Francis Bacon's. The second art teacher was a closeted gay man; he had to be closeted, I don't think an openly gay man would have been allowed to teach in the public school system at that time. He taught the craft classes,” which Kelley says he wasn't into. But he took Kelley to exhibits and “This man was my replacement father. I won a statewide student arts award and had to go to a dinner ceremony in another city. This man went with me instead of my parents. I recall that everyone laughed when I introduced him as my teacher, because you were supposed to have brought your parents.”

It seemed to all come together right there, all the strands of his rambling and transgressive career gathered in the story of his Midwestern upbringing: the Catholic-school trauma, his teenage White Panther experience, and the tutelage of his latent-homosexual high school crafts teacher who took him to art exhibits. Roll this all into one ball, and you have the artist Mike Kelley!

IMAGE COURTESY OF MIKE KELLEY

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## CALARTS

Mike Kelley might not be a household name, like his contemporaries Cindy Sherman, Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons. It would also be difficult to lump him in with that crowd aesthetically. For one thing, Kelley was doing performance art in the '70s, which was way more subversive than the fine arts scene at that time. He performed with underground rock musicians. His work was unconventional, unmarketable and uncategorical. Kelley stayed in LA, when his above-mentioned peers went to New York to pursue conventional art careers.

Kelley had and continues to have a name around town—from mentor to comrade—and being from Los Angeles is definitely a factor in Kelley's sensibility—along with Detroit, always Detroit.

A lot of Kelley's work draws from personal history, and one as rich as his would seem to provide endless material. He shrugged his shoulders when I remarked upon this but was willing to see where I was going. I asked him if he was from a dysfunctional family.

"All nuclear families are dysfunctional," he replied. "That's my belief." Then he paused. "My family wasn't dysfunctional in the sense I was beaten or abused, but my mother was a complete control freak. She wanted to control everybody's life, and it caused a lot of psychic damage. I'd say that my mother was a phallic mother, and my father was just in the background."

Kelley was the baby of four children in a family of six and describes himself as "the troublemaker. In my family, art was considered to be what communists and homosexuals did."

So your family didn't understand you at all? "No, no. I was a Martian." Kelley repeats this with a combination of nonchalance and conviction. "A Martian, a commie and a fag."

I pointed out that that sounded pretty damn dysfunctional, maybe even abusive. He neither agreed nor disagreed.

So Kelley got the hell outta Dodge as soon as he could. He went straight to Ann Arbor "because that's where all the freaks



The Mobile Horsehead parked in front of the original Kelley home on Palmer Road, Westland, Michigan, 2010, photo by Corine Vermuele

were. When I decided to go to graduate school, the only two schools I applied to were CalArts and the Art Institute of Chicago."

Kelley decided on CalArts mainly because Alan Kaprow was on the faculty. "But when I got there, he was gone," he said. "CalArts was really focused on New York. Students went to New York City as soon as they graduated; instead, I was driving into Los Angeles and checking it out and discovering a really interesting art scene. I met artists my age, especially coming out of Otis, people like Bruce Yonemoto and Jeffrey Vallance. I met Chris Burden, Alexis Smith and artists of that generation as well."

The Los Angeles art scene was much younger then, and more intimate. "There were very, very few galleries and no contemporary art museum. But there were alternative spaces, and as soon as I graduated, I became involved with LACE. I was on the committees for many years programming shows and events."

## STUFFED ANIMALS

My first real encounter with Kelley's work was at Rosamund Felsen gallery on La Brea back in the late '80s. The piece was a tattered worn blanket with grimy stuffed animals placed in the corners. Above it were black-and-white snapshots of people smearing chocolate (one hoped), on the same blanket, using the stuffed animal as props.

I had never seen anything like it before and it made a huge impression on me. I assumed Kel-

ley was thumbing his nose at the art world, but he rejected that theory. He told me it was the first series of work that made money for him. "I realized it was simply the subject matter. It wasn't my intention that I hooked into this weird thing about hearth and home. People are so invested in their childhood."

Kelley was a little perplexed by this back then, because that's really not what the work was about. "I didn't make that work for that reason. It surprised me. And that's what led me to go on to do this work about life-repressed memory syndrome."

A lot of Kelley's work invokes psychotherapy, so I had to ask if he's been in therapy. "I've been in therapy, off and on, most of my life. I also studied psychology in school and I read deeply on the subject. I've always been very interested in it."

When I asked if he thought therapy was a scam, he answered without a beat. "Yes. But it's a scam you need at the time."

## GAGOSIAN

Kelley's work today sells for as much as a million dollars in auctions. I congratulated him on this apparent mark of success. "I don't follow auctions," Kelley responded. "The galleries do that, I don't want to know how much my work goes for."

Granted, Kelley never sees any of that money if it changes hands in secondary market auctions, but the mere fact of the sale should boost the price of one's current artwork, shouldn't it? He responded dutifully, "It could, or

could not. It might up the value of that particular period of my work. I have works that sell for tremendous amounts of money, and others that I can't sell at all. I'm not necessarily going to capitalize on an inflated auction sale, that's what I'm telling you."

It seemed strange to me that, for such an abrasively uncommercial artist, success had found him. "Now that you're with Larry Gagosian, you must feel like you've made it to the top," I said.

"That's a long story," Kelley replied. "Mark Francis, who works at the Gagosian gallery in London, is a fan of my work. He invited me to mount a show there. This was when I was working on 'Day Is Done' [a feature film installation]. I had decided to leave Metro Pictures in New York, after showing there for over 20 years. I was locked into the gallery pecking order, and I realized I was never going to do better in New York if I didn't switch galleries. At some point I said to Mark, 'Day Is Done' is a big show, on the scale of a museum show, it's a waste to present it in London. I want to show it in the New York gallery. Surprisingly, they agreed to this. It was a real gamble. But luckily it worked out. The show was very successful and radically changed my reception in New York."

Kelley showed with top LA galleries early on. He started with Mizuno Gallery, Rosamund Felsen, then Patrick Painter. Then Gagosian.

Larry Gagosian is known for his empire of 11 international galleries and a strict business approach to art, therefore it wasn't surprising to hear Kelley say,

IMAGE COURTESY OF MIKE KELLEY AND MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DETROIT

"Gagosian Gallery, unlike other galleries I have shown with, is not very familial. I knew most of the artists at Metro Pictures personally. Gagosian is run in a much more businesslike way. Artists come and go."

## ONE MONTH LATER

When we went to shoot photos of Kelley, he seemed much more upbeat. He even brought along the striped shirt I suggested, similar to the one he wore in a youthful photograph included in *Dirty*, the Sonic Youth album he designed. That's when he sprang his Detroit project on me, something he's been working on for several years.

I reminded him that he said he was going to stop making art. He just mumbled something, then stared into the camera.

It didn't seem the right time to talk about the project, so I arranged a phone interview. Two weeks later, I asked him, "What's this Detroit project Mike?"

"I've been working on it for years. I wanted to work with a real structure, so I wanted to try to buy my childhood home," he told me over the phone.

This is something you forgot to tell me? I scream to myself.

The Detroit project, it turns out, may be Kelley's magnum opus. To explain it as best I can, Kelley returned to the Detroit suburb of his childhood and tried to buy the house where he grew up, in order to create a site-specific work. But the homeowner wasn't interested, and after exploring other options, Kelley settled for replicating his home (after a fashion).

The structure will be built on the grounds of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. It will be a replica of his home but with a forbidden extension; a basement, two stories deep, each level mimicking the floor plan above, evoking dungeon labyrinths.

All these elements are still on the drawing board. What Kelley has completed so far is a façade of his house—a sort of detachable face, about the size of a mobile home, that can be placed on and off a truck. (The façade is not simply a flat wall, but a three dimensional unit that fits onto the main structure.) The

piece is called *Mobile Homestead*, and two expeditions have already taken place, starting from MOCAD and ending at the Kelley home in Westland, which resulted in two documentary films which will debut at the Whitney Biennial this year.

This had all started as a project that Kelley wanted to do for personal reasons, not for public exhibition. But when Artangel, a London-based arts-funding organization, offered to sponsor the project, along with MOCAD, Kelley made some revisions and compromises and basically found himself doing public art, foregoing the original game plan.

The Detroit project is almost too fraught with psychology and dysfunction. The basements, the tunnels, the mazes—way too Freudian, even for me. But there it is.

Kelley continues to talk about this project as a public piece that was never meant to be public. Kelley left Detroit, but did he really leave it behind? He says the stuffed animals had nothing to do with childhood. (Really?) He says he needs to stop making art for a while, but now he's working on a huge project that could be one of his most important pieces to date.

I think Kelley's intended hiatus was just wishful thinking. His work is about personal history, his childhood, his hometown, psychology and dysfunction—things that could easily feel like an emotional burden. But as Kelley told me, being a conceptual artist is about ideas—and how does one shut those down? ☹

*The Stedelijk Museum is organizing "MIKE KELLEY: Themes and Variations from 35 Years," scheduled to open at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in December 2012. After Amsterdam the show is expected to travel to: Centre Pompidou, Paris; MOCA, LA; and MoMA PS1, New York.*

*See Mike Kelley's work in the Whitney Biennial 2012 opening March 1, 2012. [www.whitney.org](http://www.whitney.org)*

# SLOW SMILE

video and performance by

## JIM OVERMEN

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